

Ice Age Goats

Raymond Werner, April 2010

I was astonished to see a reference to 'Ice Age Goats' in the contents section of The Jem, number 167, March, 2010. The article itself was in reference to a representation of an ibex- along with a bison, horse and birds- that was carved into the rock face at Creswell Crags, Nottinghamshire. The carving is late Pleistocene (allegedly 12,000 years old), the artists said to be hunter-gatherers who lived in a relatively cold climate and had cultural connections with Spain and France.

None of the foregoing astonished me, however, it being the fact that I have researched the origin of the English goat for a number of years and reached the conclusion that the breed has an Ice Age origin, that drew my attention to the reference to 'Ice Age Goats'. Could it be, was my initial reaction, that someone else had researched an Ice Age origin for our English breed? Not so, as it turned out, but it is interesting to muse on the fact that when this ibex was being carved into Creswell Crags, the domestic goat that is ancestral to the English breed was already being herded in Europe by early pastoralists.

Let me explain. I believe that there are four main domestic goat types. The first to emerge was what I call the **Gracile Grassland type**, which has much in common with its wild ancestor, the Bezoar. The climate of Western Asia became warmer and wetter towards the end of the Ice Age, instigating the spread of grassland that was ideal for such species as sheep and goats. The Gracile Grassland type of goat was therefore rather antelopine in appearance and with bright wild patterning. At this time the Black Sea had yet to come into existence, so hunter-pastoralists had no difficulty in drifting northwards, through Anatolia, into Europe. There, they encountered the Great Steppe, which, at the height of the Ice Age, was a huge expanse of temperate grassland, populated my mega-fauna, that spanned the breadth of Eurasia. These hunter-pastoralists were nomadic, herding sheep, goats and cattle, and hunting big game.

Towards the end of the Ice Age, however, deglaciation brought on a period of sudden and intense cold, with freezing temperatures and immense dust storms. Across Eurasia, the Gracile Grassland type quickly adapted to become the **Cold Weather** or **Cold Steppe** type. There were two main sub-types: the Central Asian Pashmina Down goat in Asia, and the Northern Breed Group in Europe. Both were characterized by thick coats with a cashmere underwool, stocky builds with short legs, and small ears. These characteristics were a sudden and dramatic response to intense cold, the potential for frostbite and basic husbandry along with poor nutrition. Whereas the Gracile Grassland type had increased markedly in size on the Great Steppe, its Cold Weather descendant had become notably small, and due to poor nutrition.

As the post-Pleistocene climate became more equable in Europe, the hunter-pastoralists of the old Great Steppe drifted northwards and westwards in the wake of burgeoning scrub that rapidly turned into forests, following the retreating cold grasslands towards the

periphery of Europe. As the Mesolithic came to a close, rising sea levels cut off Ireland from the rest of the British Isles, and the British Isles from continental Europe. Thus, the Northern Breed Group of Cold Weather goat was fragmented into the clusters we have today: the Old Irish goat in Ireland, the Old English, Old Welsh and Old Scotch goats in Britain, and the Nordic goats (Norwegian and Swedish) in Scandinavia. Nordic goats, from Norway, were taken to Iceland in the 9th Century', and the Old Dutch goat of today marks the historical western extension of the Nordic type.

Then, as the Mesolithic pastoralists were coming to terms with the fragmentation of Northern Europe, Neolithic agriculturalists began to infiltrate the Continent from Western Asia. They came by two main routes: along the Danube Basin and into the heart of Continental Europe, and along North Africa and up into Iberia by land or through the Mediterranean and around the periphery of Europe by sea. Whatever route they took, they brought with them the old Gracile Grassland goat, the original type of the temperate grasslands of Western Asia. In Europe, it quickly adapted to become the farm goat of central and southern Europe that we know today. Somehow, the two types became firmly entrenched: the Northern Breed Group continuing to occupy the western periphery of Europe, whilst the Gracile Grassland type (known in Europe as the European Standard goat) reigned supreme in the central and southern regions of our continent.

The third type of domestic goat is the **Steppe-Desert goat**. It is notably gracile and long-legged, and a response to the steppe-desert environment, with its droughts, scrub and aridity, that developed during the Bronze Age of Western Asia. In its ultimate form, it developed the rising backline that so typifies the Anglo-Nubian. Goats of this type were brought into Mediterranean Europe following the expansion of Islam, which explains the presence of goats of both Standard and Scrubland breed type (the latter based on the Steppe-Desert goat), in Southern Europe.

The last of the four main goat types is the **Mountain type**, with a robust conformation suitable for rugged terrain.

Thus, the English goat has the longest history of any breed in the British Isles. Along with its counterparts in Ireland, Scotland and Wales, it was the goat of the earliest Neolithic pastoralists of Europe, who were familiar also with the Soay sheep and the Exmoor pony. Returning to cave art, Ice Age representations of twisted-horned goats, assumed to depict the Spanish Wild goat, may, in fact, have been dorcas-horned domesticants. It was the breed that was herded across northern Europe before the British Isles existed; its osteological remains have been unearthed in Roman Britain, and it was, according to the evidence of caulking found in boat remains, the breed of medieval London.

Developed rapidly in the appalling conditions that prevailed at the close of the Ice Age, the English goat was well suited to become all things to all people in later history: the Celtic and Saxon farm goat; the Medieval manorial herding goat; the transhumance goat of the Border Hills; the montane goat of the Welsh and Scottish uplands; the peasant goat of Ireland, and the cottager goat of Eighteenth and Nineteenth century England. With its weather-proof coat, cold-weather conformation and bulk-feeding stomach, it could withstand poor husbandry and inclement weather, and still provide a range of product that could stave off starvation for their owners during hard times. Little wonder, then, that its role today would be associated with the smallholder and all-round economy.